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Analyzing Intelligence

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WASHINGTON—Virtually all publicity about the Central Intelligence Agency has focused on covert operations, espionage, alleged abuses, and the use of sophisticated technology.

This emphasis has distracted attention from one of the intelligence community's fundamental missions: the analysis of intelligence information on political, economic and military issues.

As the Bay of Pigs and the 1973 Middle East war showed, it can be costly if available intelligence data are ignored or not properly analyzed.

There is agreement in Congress on the need for good intelligence. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has been looking not only at covert operations and possible abuses by intelligence operatives but also at ways of improving the intelligence community's legitimate gathering and assessment of information to assist United States policy-makers.

The committee recently released a report on United States intelligence analysis of international oil prices and policy before and after the 1973 Arab oil embargo.

The staff study found that policy-makers could have gotten at least as good an idea of what was going on—and what was likely to happen—from reading certain newspapers and magazines as from the classified reports prepared by the C.I.A. The study listed several reasons for this poor performance, among them the following:

- Analysts at C.I.A. headquarters who prepared the final intelligence product relied too heavily on United States Embassy reporting, relegating other sources to secondary roles. (Some C.I.A. officials may dispute this.) Partly as a result of this, intelligence analyses did not consistently identify changing Saudi Arabian intentions on the use of oil as a political weapon.

- Economic analysts and political specialists at C.I.A. headquarters did not work together. Consequently political factors were not always fully considered when analyzing such questions as whether the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries could maintain the high price of oil established during the oil embargo.

- Analysts were under great pressure to produce spot news reports for the C.I.A.'s daily publication, leaving too little time for systematic analysis. As a result, the analyses did not give policymakers an adequate understanding of the significance of events.

- Intelligence analysts continue to employ traditional approaches to oil questions long after events warranted a new look. Their failure to challenge their own preconceptions resulted in analyses that did not alert policy-makers to alternative predictions that existing intelligence information would also have supported.

This study and staff work already done on additional case studies undertaken by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence suggest the following considerations:

Intelligence analysis should be less fragmented. Currently, the collection of information is split off from analysis of that information. Political analysts are separated from economists, and specialists in one region are separated from those handling other regions or global issues. Analysts should be trained and assigned to work in shifting teams that bridge geographical and functional barriers in order to analyze all aspects of an issue.

Intelligence agencies may have to cut back their daily reporting. Pressure on an analyst for daily reporting hinders development of good analysis.

Intelligence agencies should create more senior-level positions for analysts and should recruit more outsiders for middle-level positions. This would bring in fresh perspectives. It also would allow exceptional analysts to advance their careers without having to become administrators.

Finally, intelligence agencies must accept their vital role as intellectual gadflies. If analysts will not challenge preconceptions, it is unlikely that policy-makers will do so. The record from Pearl Harbor to the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam shows the dangers of a policy blinded by preconceptions. Intelligence agencies should require analysts to question their own assumptions. Agencies should also provide more analyses that counter policy-makers' preconceptions and challenge the dominant views of the intelligence community.

Of course, there are limits to what Congress can do to effect improvements in the daily functioning of the intelligence community. But the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence already is contributing an independent and careful critique of current intelligence analysis. Improvements in analysis could make a significant contribution to our overall foreign policy.

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